



## Spotlight

### Yankee's health risks

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#### **Letters To The Editor**

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The big decision by federal regulators on whether to let the Vermont Yankee nuclear reactor operate 20 more years is approaching. Regulators have reviewed 59 similar proposals for other reactors — and approved all 59. In most areas, there is little public opposition. But various citizens and public officials in Vermont have voiced concerns, and media have reported them. Regulators are taking their time on this one.

There isn't a single nuclear "issue," but several of them. Corrosion of aging reactor parts is one. How to store waste is another. How the local area would obtain electricity if Vermont Yankee closed is yet another. However, no issue is as important as whether keeping the reactor open poses a threat to local health. Regulators need to examine the historical record on contamination and health since the reactor opened in 1972.

Vermont Yankee generates over 100 radioactive chemicals to produce electricity, and most of it is stored at the plant. This "high level waste" — equal to several Chernobyls — remains in deep pools of constantly cooled water. A meltdown, if cooling water was lost after a terrorist attack or mechanical failure, would mean thousands would suffer from radiation poisoning or cancer.

Nothing is as disastrous as a meltdown, but it doesn't take a meltdown to harm people. Each day, Vermont Yankee releases a portion of the 100-plus radioactive chemicals it produces into local air and water. These chemicals include Cesium-137, Iodine-131, and Strontium-90 — exactly the same cocktail found in atomic bomb explosions. They enter human bodies through breathing, eating, and drinking.

A recent report from the Vermont state health department examined levels of these chemicals in local air, water and food. It also looked at local cancer rates, and concluded that "no risk" from Vermont Yankee exists.

But the official health department statistics suggest otherwise. The cancer death rate in Windham County, where the reactor is located,

is the highest in Vermont. Three decades ago, the county rate was 5 percent below the U.S.; now it is 10 percent higher.

Just down the road is the Yankee Rowe reactor, which shut permanently in 1991. As Yankee Rowe continued to operate, the Franklin County cancer death rate increased, and was above the Massachusetts rate. But by this decade, the Franklin cancer death rate had fallen, and was the lowest of the 14 counties in the state. And the decline is continuing; the rate for 2006, the latest year available, is the lowest in decades.

The county with the highest cancer death rate in Massachusetts is Plymouth — the site of the Pilgrim nuclear reactor. Coincidentally or not, the Vermont and Massachusetts counties with the highest cancer rates are the only ones with nuclear reactors.

The decision on Vermont Yankee's future should be based on a "report card" of the reactor's performance. Many factors can cause cancer, but none appear to explain why cancer deaths in Windham County (where a reactor is still running) is rising and why the rate in Franklin County (where a reactor shut in 1991) is falling.

Operating an aging nuclear plant for 20 more years is a serious matter. The decision should not be made until a thorough review of local health patterns is completed and the public is fully informed of any health hazards.

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